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ABSTRACT

Intended for reading and language arts teachers of multiethnic classes, this report discusses the use of children's literature featuring Asian American characters and how these books can have a negative or positive influence on attitudes toward and of ethnic groups. The first part discusses the importance of presenting Asian American children's literature appropriately and how misuse can have a damaging effect on children of Asian descent. This section also reviews studies that show how exposure to ethnic literature can influence attitudes positively or negatively and presents guidelines for evaluating Asian American children's books. The second section is an annotated list of 12 recommended Asian American children's books. The third section presents ideas and strategies for teaching Asian American folktales, playing with language sounds, comparing cross-cultural experiences, examining history, and experiencing Asian American history through role playing. (HTH)

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"TURNING THE PAGE"

THE APPROPRIATE USE OF ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

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"TURNING THE PAGE"

The Appropriate Use of Asian American Children's Literature in the Classroom

I. Understanding the Importance of the Appropriate Use of Asian American children's literature

When I was a child, the teacher read, "Once upon a time there were five Chinese brothers and they all looked exactly alike." (Bishop, 1933, p.1)

Cautiously the pairs of eyes stole a quick glance back. I, the child, looked down to the floor.

The teacher turned the book our way: bilious yellow skin, slanted slit eyes. Not only were the brothers look alikes but so were all the other characters!

Quickly again all eyes flashed back at me. When I was a child, I sank slowly into my seat.

I, the teacher, conferenced with my students on their free selection of reading books. Bruce brings the **Five Chinese Brothers.** "Tell me about the story, Bruce."

"Well it's about these five Chinese brothers, - you know, kinda like you..."

"What do you mean, "Kinda like me?"

"Well your family is kinda Chinese or Japanese or something." Bruce pauses and stares puzzled at me and then again at his book. He quickly adds, "But maybe you're different. Aren't your eyes supposed to slant up or down?"

I, the teacher sat up. - We have work to do.

Asian American people have been separated from Asia by geography, culture, and history for greater than seven generations. We have more than a 140 year old history in America; yet where are we in the literature? Are we still the foreigners who come bumbling around in the white person's society? Are our personalities still the submissive and apologetic? Are we still the look alikes of Bishop and Wiese's **Five Chinese Brothers?**

Let's take a closer look at Asian American children's literature. In 1976 a committee of Asian American book reviewers formed the Asian American Children's Book Project under the Council of Interracial Books for Children. Their objectives were to evaluate books and identify those books which could be used effectively in educational programs.

The committee evaluated children's books in which one or more central characters were Asian American. They found a <u>total</u> of sixty-six books which fit this requirement. (Consider too, that greater than 3,000 children's books in general are published each year!) The committee accepted the the definition of Asian Americans to include all Americans of all countries but were unable to locate books in all the categories.

Of the sixty-six titles, most were about Chinese-Americans and Japanese-Americans. Two were about Korean-Americans and two were Vietnamese-American titles.

The committee found most books were published between 1945 and 1975 with the greatest number of published in the 1970's. Seven (that is, one-sixth) of the books were by authors of Asian American background.

With the evaluation of Asian American children's literature the committee concluded that with the exception of one or two, the sixty-six books were "racist, sexist, and elitist and that the image of Asian Americans they present is grossly misleading." The image presented was - "Asian Americans are foreigners who all look alike and choose to live together in quaint communities in the midst of larger cities and cling to outworn alien customs." (Bulletin, 1976, p.3)

With so few books accurately portraying Asian Americans, it is likely that more children like Bruce will continue to stereotype and hold misconceptions about Asian Americans.

Bruce may be like most other children at the beginning stages of development. He is ego-centric. He understands only in relationship to himself and finds another point of view difficult to understand. So we need to ask the question seriously. How does literature effect people?

In **What Reading Does to People,** Waples, Berelson, and Bradshaw state "reading is a social process. It relates the reader to his environment and it conditions that relationship." (1958, p. 17)

The authors continue, saying sometimes a reader has a primary relationship. That is he/she has direct physical contact with environment. But in other instances he/she has a secondary relationship. That is he/she establishes contact only through symbols as in book reading/listening. This secondary relationship or interaction with literature will affect his/her primary or direct interactions later. Both types of interaction help to develop the individual's experiences and attitudes.

One of the earliest studies done on the influence of books on children was conducted in 1944 with a group of white junior high school students. The results of this study indicated that by exposing white students to books portraying Blacks in a positive way caused attitudes towards Blacks to become more favorable.

Since then other studies too have indicated positive changes in student behavior and attitudes as a result of the usage of multiethnic materials. (Georgeoff, 1968; Litcher and Johnson, 1969;)

In 1963 Whipple conducted a study in Detroit comparing the effects of multiracial and non-multiracial reading series on reading skills. The two books utilized were similar setting. All children using the

multicultural books performed significantly better on tests of work recognition and oral reading. On a performence item, 76 percent of the students expressed better liking and interest for the multicultural books.

One ought to further consider the quality of the content of the material presented as Tauran did in 1967. This study evaluated the effects of both positive and negative stories on children.

In this study children who read positive stories about the Innuit people developed favorable attitudes toward the Innuit while students exposed to negative stories became less favorable in their attitudes. (Note: In reading this study one does not know the investigator's definition of positive and negative stories. It would imply one thing if Tauran meant positive meaning non-stereotyping and realistic. I would be cautioned if the interpretation of negative stories included deletion of true historical accounts of the Innuit.)

In her book **Print and Prejudice,** Zimet concludes that "While it would appear that much of the long term influence of reading depends upon its reinforcement in the home and community, the potential for changing a point of view has been demonstrated by the immediate effects books do have on children's beliefs."

There is evidence then to indicate that multiethnic books do affect children's attitudes and achievement.

Response to literature research indicates that the use of literature does not affect children's attitudes and concepts. Reading or listening to literature is important in children's value development. Research not only suggests that the reading or listening to literature affects attitudes but also that the active discussion of these values is just as important. (Berg-Cross, 1978; Monson and Shurtleff, 1979, and Fisher, 1965).

To change attitudes towards racial groups, research indicates that teachers should use quality selections as well as quality discussions. Teachers need to help students focus on the understandings of others, to clarify misconceptions and to share relevant experiences and feelings.

Rather than teaching didactic lessons from trade book literature (children's literature, library books) teachers can help their students become active learners by jumping into the story and taking the point of view of the character with a focussed "You are" type question. In becoming the character, the student can better understand the motives and actions.

According to Piaget's developmental stages children are egocentric and find another's point of view difficult to understand. At the same time Maslow's hierarchy of needs indicate people strive for a sense of belonging and safety. Therefore with the "You are" type questions you can help your students to further their understandings of similarities, to explore differences and to establish the comfort zone of knowing "you belong."

An example of a point of view question based on this discussion might be: "You are the teacher. What would you have said to Bruce when he asked 'Aren't your eyes supposed to slant up or down?" Or one based on a Japanese folktale, **Urashima Taro,** "You are Taro. Why did you disobey the warnings of the Sea Princess?" Pursue with your students how things, feelings, and/or actions are similar even though names, appearances, or cultures might be different. Then further with acknowledging and accepting the differences.

In opposition to jumping into the story and taking the identity of various characters, students can also learn to do the reverse. Students can learn to find elements within the story and tie those elements to their own life experiences in order to make book reading/ listening identifiable and applicable with its universal themes. An example of relating self type questions might be: "Tell about the time someone laughed at you for eating something different. What did you do or say in response. Tell how your reactions might have been like the character in the book." Or based on the tale of **Urashima Taro,** "Tell about the time you were so curious you opened a box even though you were warned not to. How might Taro's feelings be similar to yours?"

So the situation exists that we still have stereotyping attitudes and concepts compounded by existing children's literature which still reinforces those concepts and alienates Asian American children. Yet we know usage of accurate literature can affect attitudes and concepts of individuals.

On the surface level we can begin to develop and utilize criteria to evaluate existing books and with those guidelines educators can use the books in proper perspective. Educators, authors, illustrators, and publishers should also use those guidelines in the writing of, illustration of, and usage of new literature.

The Asian American Children's Book Project committee has helped to establish the following guidelines:

1. A children's book about Asian Americans should reflect the realities and way of life of an Asian American people.

2. A children's book about Asian Americans should transcend stereotypes.

3. A children's book about Asian Americans should seek to rectify historical distortions and omissions.

4. A children's book about Asian Americans should avoid the "model" minority and "super" minority syndromes.

5. A children's book about Asian Americans should reflect an awareness of the changing status of women in society.

6. A children's book about Asian Americans should contain art and photos which accurately reflect the racial diversity of Asian Americans. (Bulletin, 1976, p. 4)

(For a detailed criteria refer to, "Criteria for analyzing Books on Asian Americans," **Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, Vol. 7, Nos. 2 & 3, 1976).**

In evaluating and utilizing these books we must consider too that each of the books is an experience or viewpoint of a person. It is realistic to the author from his/her perspective and it is his/her right as an author to share that view. It is the responsibility of the publishers and educators to present a multitude of viewpoints of Asian American experiences to be shared by Asian American children as well as non-Asian Americans.

II. Recommended list of Asian American Children's Literature

Following is a list of good Asian American children's fiction.

Arruego, Jose. **A CROCODILE'S TALE.** New York, N.Y.: Scribner's, 1972. (primary) A Filipino folk tale focusing on gratitude and helping.

Coutant, Helen and Vo-Dinh. **FIRST SNOW.** New York, N.Y.: Knopf, 1974. (primary) A sensitive story of a young Vietnamese American girl's first experience with a New England snowfall and the death of her grandmother.

Ignacio, Melissa M. **THE PHILIPPINES: ROOTS OF MY HERITAGE.** Pilipino Development Associates, 1977. (intermediate and up) The tellings of a journey of a Filipino American teenager.

Uchida, Yoshiko. **JOURNEY HOME.** New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1978. (intermediate and up) The story of twelve year old Yuki and her family who return to their home in Berkeley after being imprisoned in one of America's concentration camps during World War II.

Uchida, Yoshiko. **JOURNEY TO TOPAZ.** New York, N.Y.: Scribner's 1971. (intermediate and up) A portrayal of a young child's experience during the evacuation of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast during World War II.

Uchida, Yoshiko. **THE ROOSTER WHO UNDERSTOOD JAPANESE.** New York, N.Y.: Scribner's, 1976. (primary) Story of a young Asian American girl helping out her next door neighbor.

Uchida, Yoshiko. **SAMURAI OF GOLD HILL.** New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 1972. (intermediate and up) A narrative based upon the historical account of the Wakamatsu Colony, one of the first immigrating parties from Japan, and on the findings of a grave on Gold Hill, north of Sacramento, California, "In Commemoration of Okei Died in 1872 19 years old A Japanese girl."

Yashima, Taro and Mitsu. **MOMO'S KITTEN.** New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1961 (primary) Momo, a young Asian American child, finds a lost kitten and takes the responsibilities in caring for it.

Yashima, Taro. **UMBRELLA.** New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1958. (primary) Momo receives a new umbrella for her birthday and then waits in vain for a rainy day for a chance to use it.

Yep, Laurence. **CHILD OF THE OWL.** New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1977. (intermediate and up) Casey, a Chinese American girl is sent to live with her Paw-Paw, her maternal grandmother, in San Francisco's Chinatown, where she learns about herself as a Chinese American.

Yep, Laurence. **DRAGONWINGS.** New York, N.Y.: Harper Row, 1975. (intermediate and up) Based upon the factual accounts of a Chinese immigrant who built a flying machine during the Wright era, this is a novel of Windrider and his son Moonshadow who successfully build a flying machine during the early 1900's. The story also reflects the realities encountered by the immigrating Chinese.

Yep, Laurence. **SEA GLASS.** New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1979. (intermediate and up) A narrative of a Chinese youth who fails to measure up to his father's ideal of an All American sports player and who is considered a "fat Chinese Buddha Man" by friends yet considered a "white demon" by the old Chinese of the neighborhood. With the sensitivity and insight of Uncle Quail, Craig begins to find his own niche and self esteen.

III. TEACHING IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

A. FOLKTALES

Folktales provide an excellent evolutionary bridge from old country cultural perspectives to Asian American perspectives. Folktales set the scene for discussion and discovery of universal themes and plots. With these fictional tales teachers can easily tie the teaching of reading comprehension skills and social studies concepts to folktale units.

Develop a world of folktale bulletin board with your students. Given a map of the world help your students identify various folktales and their country of origin. Use yarn and pin markers form the country of origin to labels which identify folktale variants, i.e. Use all red colored yarn to label the Cinderella tales, use all blue colored yarn to label Hare and Tortoise tales.

A start might be to read the many variations of Cinderella:
Cinderella - French tale
Tatercoats - English tale
Moss Green Princess - African Swazi tale
Ash Pet - Virginia and N. Carolina Grandfather tale
The Girl Who Was Saved by a Talking Bird - Pilipino tale
The Jewel Slipper - Vietnamese tale

Then make comparisons and discoveries as to plot and theme similarities. Continue the discussion focusing on how characters and/or setting changed the tale according to the uniqueness of the country of origin. Help your students explore possibilities as to why the differences, i.e. Are they different because of geographical areas and climate, culture, social, religious, and/or educational influences.

Now take this one step further. Given the common essential elements of a selected folktale, i.e. Cinderella, create a modern day version. Tie this back to your original discussion as to the timelessness of universal themes and differences due to place, culture, etc.

For a helpful start try matching the following tales:

Urashima Taro (Japanese) with **Rip Van Winkle** and/or **Pandora's Box**
Momotaro (Japanese) with **Superman** (thanks to Maggie Brown, second grader)
Two of Everything (Chinese) with **Magic Pot** and/or **Magic Porridge Pot**
Isshum Boshi (Japanese) with **Tom Thumb**
Crocodile's Tale (Filipino) with **Gingerbread Boy**

Find others from Asian Folk and Fairy Tale collections as:

Aquino, Gaudencio, Bonifacio Cristobal, and Delfin. **PHILIPPINE FOLK TALES.** Alemar, 1969.
Arbuthnot, May Hill and Zena Sutherland. **THE ARBUTHNOT ANTHOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE.** Scott Foresman, 1976.
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Graham, Gail B. **THE BEGGAR IN THE BLANKET AND OTHER VIETNAMESE TALES.**
Hung Ha, Tae **FOLK TALES OF OLD KOREA.** Yonsei Univ., 1977.
In-Sob, Zong. **FOLK TALES FROM KOREA.** Hollym Corporation, 1970.
Pedroche, Conrado V. **THE GINGER GIRL AND OTHER STORIES.**
Robertson, Dorothy L. **FAIRY TALES FROM THE PHILIPPINES.**
Sakade, Florence. **JAPANESE CHILDREN'S FAVORITE STORIES.** Tuttle, 1958.
Sakade, Florence. **JAPANESE CHILDREN'S STORIES.** Tuttle, 1959.
Sechrist, Elizabeth. **ONCE IN THE FIRST TIMES.** (Filipino)
Wyndham, Robert. **TALES THE PEOPLE TELL IN CHINA.** Messner, 1971.

B. PLAYING WITH LANGUAGE SOUNDS

Momo's Kitten and **Umbrella** by Taro Yashima are two simple tales of an Asian American girl growing up, learning to be responsible and independent. The two stories also lend themselves to uncover different onomatopoeic words. i.e. The sound of rain falling on an umbrella =/bon polo bon polo/and a cat saying/neow ne ɔw/. This is a great opportunity for you and your students to make comparisons of different "sound words." Sample comparisons from different children's literature pieces might be:

Umbrella by Taro Yashima-sound of rain=bon polo bon polo
"Galoshes," by Bacmeister (in **Bridled with Rainbows**, by Brewton. Macmillan, 1949, p. 24.-sound of rain=splishes and sploshes, and slishes and sloshes

Involve your students, their parents, and your second language learners. Find out the different sounds different language groups use. i.e. In Japanese, cats say "neow neow"
dogs say "wan wan"
cows say, "moe moe"
When discovering different language equivalents some students may begin to have difficulty producing the sounds. This is a great opportunity to use first hand experience to discuss why second language learners might have difficulties hearing and producing English sounds.

C. CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES COMPARISONS

Children's books which focus upon the relationship between the young and elderly, about life and death are scarce. **First Snow** by Coutant and Vo-Dinh is a beautiful story of a young Vietnamese American girl who learns from her grandmother the meaning of death. This simple story provides the basis for excellent discussions and how different cultures view life and death, about the Buddhist religion, and aobut extended family functions and responsibilities.

Again other chidren's books which provide good cross cultural comparisons might include:

Depola, Thomas Anthony. **Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs.** Putnam, 1973.
Lee, Virginia. **The Magic Moth.** Seabury Press, 1972.
Miles, Miska. **Annie and the Old One.** Little, Brown, 1971.
Zolotow, Charolotte. **My Grandson Lew.** Harper, 1974.

D. ANOTHER LOOK AT HISTORY

Given the factual historical accounts of the World War II internment of persons of Japanese ancestry, have your students read Uchida's **Journey to Topaz** and **Journey Home.** Make comparisons to the factual accuracies. Use the point of view and/or relating self type questions to discuss the experiences of the young at camp. A comparative biography might be Monica Sone's Nisei Daughter (University of Washington Press, 1979).

E. ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY EXPERIENCED THROUGH ROLE PLAYING

Laurence Yep's novels **Dragonwings**, Child of the Owl, and **Sea Glass** are also the bases for excellent historical comparisons to Chinese American history, i.e., develop a library research assignment to find out about the true accounts of the Chinese American aviator, Fong Joe Guey and his airplane. Uncover how this became the basis for Yep's novel, **Dragonwings.**

Through the use of poiont of view and relating self questions and Yep's **Child of the Owl** and **Sea Glass**, help build the self awareness and concept of Asian American students.

Try utilizing a variation of the role playing technique as outlined by Shaftel with various chapters from Yep's books. Give your students only part of the chapter, the beginning to the problematic situation. Stop the story and help your students role play by: 1) defining the problem, 2) delineating alternatives - what will happen now? 3) exploring alternatives - act out and role play the possible solutions, and 4) making a decision as to what was the best alternative.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have a responsibility to present Asian American experiences to both Asian Americans and non. We need to provide accurate knowledge about others while facilitating accurate knowledge and pride in one's identiy, as well as providing tools to combat the impact of racism and sexism.

From this surface level change perhaps we can continue to heighten the awareness of teachers and author/illustrators, and encourage more writers and publishers as to the needs of quality Asian American children's literature to affect a deep structure change in children's actions and attitudes.

How much longer will books cause Asian American children to crawl under their desks? How much longer will non-Asian American children formulate misconceptions? Will Asian American children as well as non-Asian American children continue to turn the pages of the **Five Chinese Brothers**? Yes, we have work to be done.

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